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ABSTRACT

A study examined how well children in grades K-5 comprehended expository texts. Subjects for the study were 54 elementary children in a northeastern Ohio elementary school, 9 in each grade--3 of high ability, 3 of average ability, and 3 of low ability. Data collection was by 30 preservice elementary education majors in a reading methods class. Results showed that average and high ability children of all grade levels were able to retell the children's nonfiction books they heard. Approximately half of the low ability readers were unable to retell their books, but this latter result varied from one grade level to another. While the ability to infer beyond the text and relate the text to personal life varied among the subjects, most of them were able to sequence the text, identify main ideas and details and summarize to the extent that they received a score of 3 or better on the Irwin and Mitchell scale (1983). The retellings of less able children generally contained fewer details and fewer instances of inferences beyond the text or attempts to relate the texts to their own lives. The majority of children at all grade levels were able to review the text after completing their reading. Future research should examine the role of background knowledge and whether the expository structure of the text impacts children's ability to retell. (Contains five tables of data and a "richness of retellings" scale.) (TB)

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Using Retellings to Assess Children's Comprehension of Expository Text

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by

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Using Retellings to Assess Children's Comprehension of Expository Text

A. Objectives

The **primary objective** of this in-progress descriptive study is to determine the degree to which children with low, average, and high ability in grades K-5 are able to comprehend expository text as revealed by their ability to competently retell children's nonfiction trade books. A secondary **objective** of this study is to determine if and how the retellings of children of high, middle and low reading ability children at the same grade level differ. A **third objective** is to identify how children of all ages and ability levels choose to retell, whether through the illustration they draw, through review of the text, or through recall.

B. Perspectives

For many years, narrative text has predominated in elementary classrooms. The assumption that children's ability to understand narrative or story precedes their ability to comprehend exposition is a long-standing one in the area of literacy instruction (Pappas, 1991). Numerous studies have provided information on children's understanding of and response to narrative text.

While even preschoolers exhibit intuitive knowledge of story structure (Stein & Glenn, 1979), older children lack awareness of common expository text structures (Englert and Hiebert, 1984) and themselves identify expository material as more difficult to read than narrative (Alvermann & Boothby, 1982). Moreover, studies comparing children's competence in narrative and exposition indicate that older students have less control of nonfiction forms than narrative (Langer, 1985).

Three reasons have been postulated for children's difficulty with exposition: 1) they lack early exposure to this pattern of discourse (Langer, 1985) 2) older children lack classroom experiences in reading and writing informational text and 3) basal readers and content area texts, primary vehicles for instruction in the vast majority of classrooms, emphasize narrative and contain poorly-organized exposition (Anderson, Armbruster, & Kantor, 1980).

Pappas (1991) recently used retellings of children's nonfiction to assess kindergartner's expository comprehension. In comparing 20 kindergartners' ability to retell a narrative children's tradebook with their ability to retell a nonfiction children's trade book, she found that kindergartners were as capable of retelling informational text as narrative.

Pappas' results suggest that elementary grade children may possess far more control over expository text that has previously been thought. Moreover, they suggest that by using 1) the well-organized text found in children's nonfiction trade books as children's reading material, and 2) retellings rather than questions as the means for assessing comprehension, we may now be in a position to learn more about children's comprehension of exposition. The chief purpose of this study, then, is to examine how well

children of varying reading ability in grades K-5 comprehend expository text as measured through retellings of children's nonfiction trade books.

C. **Methodology**

Subjects for this study include 54 elementary grade children (9 at each grade level) in a northeastern Ohio elementary school. Three high, average, and low ability children were selected at each grade level. Thirty preservice elementary education majors in a reading methods class are collecting the data. These preservice teacher/researchers have been taught to elicit student retellings through classroom-based training sessions and demonstrations.

Nonfiction children's trade books were selected for use in this study on the basis of several criteria: 1) appropriateness of subject matter for a given grade level 2) appropriateness of the difficulty level of the text for a given grade level and 3) clarity of the text's organizational pattern. Only books with macrostructures exhibiting clearly identifiable expository patterns were selected. The following texts were chosen for use with children at all ability levels within the indicated grade level: Trucks (K), How Kittens Grow (1), How is a Crayon Made (2), Fire, Fire (3), Sunken Treasure (4) and Questions and Answers About Dinosaurs (5).

Each preservice teacher/researcher worked with a single child. The ability level of each subject was unknown to the preservice teacher/researcher. The preservice teacher/researcher explained to the subjects that after hearing the book they would be asked to draw a picture about the book and then retell the book as if telling it to a friend who had never heard it before. Children were told that they could retell from their picture, by reviewing the book, or through recall. Each preservice teacher/researcher then read a children's nonfiction trade book aloud to their subject. After hearing the book, each subject retold it in one of the three aforementioned ways. Preservice teacher/researchers audio-tape recorded and transcribed each retelling.

D. **Data Sources and Analysis**

Eighteen subjects, three at each grade level from K-5, (one low, average and high ability child per grade) have participated in this study. Stanine scores from standardized reading test results were used to identify children as low (stanine 1-3) readers, average (stanine 4-6) readers, or high (stanine 7-9) readers.

Irwin & Mitchell's (1983) 5-point scale for judging the richness of retellings was used to assess each retelling. This scale provides for holistic evaluation not unlike that used for evaluating writing samples. It assesses student ability to identify overall text structure, main ideas, relevant details, summarize, and generalize beyond the text. Each retelling was assigned a score ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 5. Competent retellings were identified as those obtaining scores of 3 or better. The principal researcher trained preservice teacher/researchers in this technique via several practice scoring sessions. Each retelling was scored twice by two different students,

and those retellings wherein a more than one point discrepancy was found was rescored by a third reader.

E. Results and Conclusions

1) Results suggest that average and high ability children at all grade levels were able to competently retell the children's nonfiction trade books they heard. Approximately half of the low ability readers were unable to adequately retell their books; this, however, varied from grade level to grade level and book to book.

2) While the ability to infer beyond the text and relate text to one's own life varied among the subjects, most of the children studied were able to sequence the text, identify main ideas and details, and summarize to the extent that they received a score of 3 or better on the Irwin & Mitchell (1983) scale.

3) The retellings of less able children generally contained fewer details and fewer instances of inferring beyond the text or relating text material to their own lives than did retellings of average and high ability readers. The retellings of low, average, and high ability children in grades 4 were quite similar. This did not prove to be as true at the other grade levels, but the typical range of scores was approximately three points.

4) The majority of children at all grade levels reviewed the text as they completed their retelling. Three of the high ability readers retold the book from memory, while the others retold both from memory and by reviewing the text. Several average ability child retold the text from his illustration.

F. Importance of the Study Further understanding of elementary grade children's ability to comprehend and respond to expository text is crucial if today's educators are to prepare children for the information age. This study, while preliminary, confirms Pappas' (1991) findings that even young children can comprehend expository text.

G. Questions for Further Research

1) To what extent does background knowledge impact children's ability to retell expository text

2) To what extent does the expository structure of the text impact children's ability to retell? Are certain structures more easily remembered than others?

3) Will practice in retelling enhance children's ability to retell expository text?

G. **References**

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RICHNESS OF RETELLINGS SCALE

Level	Criteria for Establishing Level
5	Student includes all main ideas and supporting details; sequences properly; infers beyond the text; relates text to own life; understands text organization; summarizes; gives opinion and justifies it; MAY ask additional ?s very cohesive and complete retelling
4	Student includes most main ideas and supporting details; sequences properly; relates text to own life; understands text organization; summarizes; gives opinion and justifies it; cohesive and complete reteilling
3	Student includes some main ideas and details; sequences most material; understands text organization, gives opinion; fairly complete retelling
2	Student includes a few main ideas and details; some difficulty sequencing; may give irrelevant information;gives opinion; incomplete retelling
1	Student gives details only; poor sequencing, irrelevant information; very incomplete retelling

Adapted from Irwin, P. A. & Mitchell, J. N. (1983). A procedure for assessing the richness of retellings. Journal of Reading, 26, 394,395.

Low	Average	High
2	3	4
2	3	4
3	3	4

Table 1. Kindergartners Scores on Retelling of Truck

Low	Average	High
2	3	5
2	3	4
3	3	4

Table 2 First Graders' Scores on Retelling of How Kittens Grow

Low	Average	High
3	2	4
3	3	4
2	3	4

Table 3 Second Graders' Scores on Retelling of Dinosaurs Alive

Low	Average	High
2	3	4
2	3	4
2	3	3

Table 4. Third Graders' Scores on Retelling of Fire, Fire

Low	Average	High
3	4	3
3	3	3
4	3	3

Table 5 Fourth Graders' Scores on Retelling of Sunken Treasure